



I am, therefore I'm not (Woman)

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses Object Relations theory to think about the dynamics governing the production of cultural identity in Irish Studies. Arguably women's writing is positioned within Irish studies in what Luce Irigaray terms "the place of the mother". The mother within the nuclear and patriarchal determined family is allocated the function of object through which the other members of the family derive their own identity. When a woman writer inscribes her subjective presence then she disrupts the production of other's identity, and challenges the dynamics of a family structure that need to rely on her absence from it. Such refusal to be simply an object is often met with resistance. This paper argues that Eavan Boland's collection *The Lost Land* alters Boland's object use within the cultural context of Irish studies, and it examines some of the criticism attaching to it accordingly.

KEYWORDS: daughter; inter-subjective; Irish Studies; maternal body; Mother Ireland; Oedipal crisis; Object Relations; phallic mother; the place of the mother; Eavan Boland.

Irish Studies can be understood as a discursive symbolic space in the terms set out by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993). Bourdieu argued that neither a single institution nor individual was responsible for the manufacture of "reputations", but rather that it was indeed the dynamics that prevailed in the whole "field of production" itself that authenticated and built the profile of a cultural producer. Bourdieu describes this "field" as "the system of objective relations" that pertains between "institution, review, magazine, academy, coterie, dealer" and "publisher" (Bourdieu, 1993: 78). A field or space of symbolic production can also be considered in psychoanalytic terms in which case the "objective relations" of the

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sociologist become the "Object Relations" of the analyst. Object Relations theory contends that not only do we relate to each other inter-subjectively, but also as objects. which we use in various modes of relationship with each other.' In *Like Subject, Love Objects* (1995) Jessica Benjamin takes the standard Object Relations observation that woman is the primary object because she is the first means by which the child mediates its relationship to itself and, she argues, this normal psychic operation is often culturally protracted well beyond its initial usefulness in societies that fetishise the selflessness of a mother. In such societies a woman's object use is privileged over her recognition as a subject.

If the 'objective relations' that pertain between text and the discursive culture are understood as psychoanalytically implicated in a set of 'Object Relations', the question of the family in which a set operates is raised. If the family in this case is understood to be the family of Irish Studies, then the object function of the woman writer within this family is to authenticate the Irish subject at the expense of her own. Thus the aesthetic presentation of a female self-identity necessarily disrupts the precarious balance of the 'family' and questions the 'subject' on which claims for cultural authority are made. The object relations of this family are inhospitable to the articulating self-presence of women writers. The paper thus considers how women's writing disrupts the object relations necessary to produce the subjectivity of another —be that a collective nationalist persona, a unified and visionary Irish Studies 'symbolic space', a self-deconstructed 'subject' of Irish Studies, or indeed a critical perspective invested in protecting the terms of a specific form of cultural authority.

The mother within the nuclear and patriarchal determined family is allocated the function of object through which the other members of the family derive their own identity, and whose subjective absence guarantees their presence. When a woman insists on her own subjectivity she disrupts this process and challenges the dynamics of a family structure predicated on that belief. In so challenging the mechanics of how the subjectivity of the others in the family are guaranteed, the subject and the family is destabilised and the response is often one of resisting the self-validation of the mother-object. Later the paper will look at how Eavan Boland's collection *The Lost Land* (1998) is met with this punitive and denying response because it alters the object relations that exist between reader, critic and text in Irish Studies that are responsible for building literary reputations.

THE FAMILY OF IRISH STUDIES

The continued use of the mother as an object, and the resistance to her subjectivity is traceable to a cultural privileging of an understanding of symbolisable subjectivity as beginning with the Oedipal crisis. The Oedipal crisis depends on the foreclosure of the possibility of recognition of the mother as a subject. The mother object's presence is sanctioned in the symbolic only because she represents lack. that is, brought into existence or symbolic representation when the son realises she doesn't have a penis. Specifically this means the providing of the perspective of the Oedipal child as the authentic view, and not co-recognition of the mother's perspective that registers no such horror at a supposed lack. Within cultural nationalism the view of the child was repeated until it achieved the status of a historical orthodoxy. This (lacking) phallic mother's selflessness confirms the son's, and thus the nation's, subjectivity, as for instance in the Padraic

See, for example, Bollas, (1987; 1993; 1995).

Pearse poem, "The Mother", which was written on the eve of his execution in his mother's voice. The opening lines are:

I do not **grudge** them: Lord, I do not **grudge**
My two strong sons that I have seen go out
To break their strength and die, they and a few,
In bloody **protest** for a **glorious** thing (Pearse, 1917: 333)

The self-lessness of the mother who doesn't "begrudge" her sons to the nationalist cause, is echoed in the idealist constitutional 'self-lessness' of Irish mothers. The mother/woman of the Irish 'Free State's' constitution has been modelled on "the image of a passive, self-sacrificing 'mother' figure [which] has strong roots in Irish Catholicism: [and is] linked with an image of Mary as a woman who obeyed without question and devoted her life to the service of her son" (O'Connor, 1997: 79). In popular nationalist terms phallic Mother Ireland functioned as an object through which 'her' citizens mediate a symbolic relationship to their themselves as subjects, demonstrating Jean-François Lyotard's argument that:

Woman could indeed be accepted and honoured by the citizen and the politician as mother, the mother of their sons: for as it happens, she is the indispensable intermediary between them and these sons. The *corpus scions* cannot be reproduced without the belly of women. [...] Goddesses of fertility are more orgiastic than civic, and their cult is maintained in Greece by banishing it to the obscurity of the Bacchae; it is eliminated in one by Christianity, then sublimated as a cult of Mary. The male Christian Westerner does not pay homage to women but to his own reproductive force, stockpiled in the belly of the virgin and exploited in that of the mother Christianity has already posed the question: should women be educated, and how. Capitalism generalises the method proposes below: exclusion of women based on homologation, not exile. Capitalism contributes to the destruction of their position within the family enclosure; according to its needs, it even partially integrates their reproductive function by acting indirectly on their propension to procreate and by treating as commodities their products, those famous sons, as well as the bellies that bear them. (Lyotard, 1989: 111-121)

Whilst a woman's subjective presence was of little interest to the fledgling state, her body certainly wasn't. Pat O'Connor writes of republic that "within the context of the ideological parameters of the state, the roman catholic church and invisible patriarchy, the existence of women's personhood other than at a reproductive level was effectively a non issue" (O'Connor, 1997: 180).

Irish Studies is configured by the terms of the nuclear' patriarchal family, which has been described as a family unit in which

The issue of the rights of all the individuals involved, particularly women and children, to privacy, autonomy, and self-determination is obscured, the implication being that, by some process of osmosis, their identities, wishes, etc., will coincide with those of the head of the household — or if they conflict, they will be subsumed within it. This ideology is supported in Ireland by the church, state, and the invisible patriarchy. (O'Connor, 1997: 182-183)

The selflessness of the mother who mediates this relationship imports into Irish Studies the notion of 'lack' necessary to confirm the presence of the doubting Irish post-structuralist subject. At one

³ Clair Wills (2001: 38) notes that "Since the 1950s the pattern of the traditional extended family has largely disappeared and been replaced by the atomised, nuclear family".

level it is represented as the lack of women's writing, as for instance in the necessary loss of this from the original three volumes of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, and in the continued signalling of the 'loss' or lack of women's writing, or feminist critique in subsequent studies and analysis.⁴ In a post-structuralist climate of ontological and epistemological doubt and scepticism, the assertion of the subject of Irish Studies is more often that not coupled with its concomitant deconstruction, and thus a bid for subjectivity must be carried out in terms of another forfeit—that of woman. Irish Studies has tended to focus primarily on Irish Studies' ontological status as a subject, with a bid for authenticity through appeal to or search for some origin and, in a specifically post-colonial context, a lost origin. In this cultural imaginary, mother and origin are understood as coterminous, and loss of mother ('s subjectivity), necessary to encode loss of origin.

Mothers and myths of origins have the same function, which may in the end be to remind us that something is always lost in stories of the constitution of the subject, whether we call it the body or an undivided self. (Jacobus, 1995: 16)

Mother and origin are denied, obscured and 'problematised', made into sites of ambivalence that cancel out the possibility of her self-presence, but her codified loss functions as amulet that guarantees the self-presence of the melancholic subject. Through the loss of the mother the child subject can be seen to come into existence in the symbolic through the Oedipal crisis. It is important to qualify Jacobus's assertion about myths and motherhood, as it is specifically in Oedipally structured *narratives* of the constitution of the subject that the place of the mother and myths of origins have the same function. Thus the favouring of Oedipal models of identity and historical relationship depend on investing in a notion of lost origins and on keeping the mother 'lost'.

MISSING WOMEN: MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS

Notions of cultural representativeness and structure of the canon are not extended beyond the Oedipal model which underwrites the notion of literary history and insider-outsiderness that are dominant in terms of the production of cultural identity in Ireland today. The loss of women's writing in the traditions and canon of the latter half of the twentieth century is part of the necessary operations of a "melancholic discourse" of tradition that is predicated on loss (Bhabha, 1991: 102). It adds up to a state of "dereliction" of women within the symbolic order. "Women's ontological status in this culture is dereliction, the state of abandonment, described significantly in the same terms (*un fusionnel*) as the psychoanalytic term for merging or failure to differentiate and separate." (Whitford, 1991: 81) This is less a failure of women to separate from each other, but of society to separate from the mother. The symbolic dereliction of Irish women's writers

For instance Conor McCarthy (2000: 43) writes:

Some explanation is in order as to the absence here of creative writing by women. My intention has been to deal with writing that is either canonical (Friel, Banville) or counter-canonical (Bolger). I do not believe that a solid canon, or counter-canon, of recent or contemporary Irish women's writing as yet exists, and the problem with the essentially Agonistic model of cultural production in use here is that it has the effect of seeking out suitable groups of opponents who can be pitched against each other. I chose at the outset to deal with figures that had achieved canonical or near canonical status, and a serious study of contemporary female writers would seem to be as much an investigative and reconstructive task as a critical project.

within the cultural field results in preventing the full emergence of a subjectivity that challenges the defining Oedipal model. This psychological state of dereliction is defined as "a state of fusion [*fusionnel*] which does not succeed in emerging as a subject" (Whitford, 1991: 81).

In the Oedipal triangles the 'place of the mother' is the only space available to woman, be she mother or daughter. The daughter and mother are collapsed into the one place, the place of the (phallic) mother, without separate names, meanings and a symbolic arrangement with which to recognise, identify with and thus individuate from one another. Insofar as Jacosta was mother and lover rolled into one, the 'place of the mother' incorporates mother, daughter and lover in the one site. Women must compete for the privilege of occupying this space —and thus we are familiar with the 'exceptional woman' who makes it into the canon. Her place in the canon as it stands is the 'place of the mother'. Arguments that depend on protecting such 'exceptionality' protects the terms of the Oedipal triangle and thus such women have to be disidentified with other women, rather than be identified with them in alternative relationship configurations.

However, if the notion of family or the psychodynamics of entering the symbolic and configuring identity were imagined otherwise then, representationally, more places would structurally be available to woman. In reality a mother functions as more than simply a symbol of loss, and it is this very confinement to such a symbolic position that has prevented the representation of mother as woman, mother in relation to daughter and daughter in relation to mother. In the Oedipal structuring of history, of myths of art and artist and of tradition in mainstream Irish Studies, there is currently no place for the figuring of mother-daughter relations, highlighting what Irigaray has identified as a structural blind spot in the western imaginary: "there is no possibility whatsoever, within the current logic of socio-cultural operations, for a daughter to situate herself with respect to her mother: because, strictly speaking, they make neither one nor two. neither has a name, meaning, sex, of her own, neither can be 'identified' with respect to the other" (Whitford, 1991: 82).

The co-subjectivity of the mother as a desiring, self-present adult subject interferes with the objectified use of tropes of mother as the self-less carrier of ideologies. When the re-investment of the Oedipal model is of primary concern to a critical narrative then it resists, often with punitive measures, the opening up of the 'place of the mother'. This prohibition continues a "non-differentiation (in-difference) of mother and daughter, and thus to the non-symbolisation of their relationship" (Whitford, 1991: 87). This results in more than simply a lack of images of mothers and daughters. The constitutional insistence on the muting of the woman in the mother/women signifier, the unpacking of these terms within representational practices specially prevents the full realisation of any notion of equality and inhibits any meaningful understanding of equality and justice. Jessica Benjamin warns us of the consequences for social justice of continuing to think of the mother as primarily an object when she writes: "denial of the mother's subjectivity, in theory and in practice, profoundly impedes our ability to see the world as inhabited by equal subjects" (Benjamin, 1995: 31). This has real repercussions at the level of the socio-sexual economy for lived lives, for mothers and daughters both, who are each representationally understood as existing in the 'place of the mother'. When there is no "genealogy on the side of women" then the "generational differences are blurred" and "the man takes the woman as a substitute for his mother while the woman simply takes her mother's place" (Whitford, 1991: 87). The woman continues to relate to the mother (-in-law) as an object in the 'place of the mother', and thus the inter-generational relationship continues to rely upon on

absence, not self-presence, as the configuring mode of self-definition. The woman is not constructed as a subject, so an *inter-subjective* relation between the women who would break open the mother/daughter compound is not thus possible.

To this extent Irish Studies is comfortable with the familiar refrain of the 'lack' of women's writing, of its marginality, and of its historical loss, as it continues a narrative of loss necessary for the re-investment of a particular structuring narration of nation, or indeed post-nation. Without the recognised co-subjectivity of the mother, without her full realisation as a person, a subject and as a desiring being situated in language, in the symbolic, then "an alliance with an encounter between the energies of both [sexes] remains impossible" (Irigaray, 1991: 106). But before this could happen, there would have to be a willingness to lose current models of mapping culture and conferring status, in other words a reorganisation of the 'objective relations'. There would have to be a willingness to encounter the representational unknown, that is, what the symbolic world might look like from the perspectives of both mother and child.

Recognition of the mother as subject means losing current models of understanding the relationship of the cultural 'child' to the 'lost' mother. Griselda Pollack observes that the cultural stage on which the recognition of great works is valorised is the "world view" of the Oedipal boy. By extension the discursive culture that emerges around such works can be said to represent the relationship between the young boy who needs to keep his mother's subjectivity 'lost' in order for her to function as a suitable object for his own self-validation. As such women's writers or claims to authorship, subjectivity, self-ownership threaten to disrupt the mother child relationship in place between the cultural child and the mother/matter of form, or 'art', about which and *for which* the child will speak in order to individuate itself (Pollack, 1999: 13-14). This argument takes on an interesting aspect when applied to some of the critical responses that Eavan Boland's *The Lost Land* has received that demonstrate the reluctance of the cultural child to separate from the notion of the lost and absent 'mother'.

THE LOST LAND AND ITS CRITICS

Boland's early poetic intervention in the tropes and iconicities of Irish motherhood had seemed to augur a "new territory" for her, a new language in which a woman writing could have equal purchase on the shared symbolic systems of a nation, but by 1998 this "new territory" had become *The Lost Land*, symbolising her acknowledgement of the loss of woman within Oedipally configured literary histories. The optimism and good faith in the new territory of woman being embraced by the discursive culture is lost by 1998, as the poet became increasingly aware of the structural resistance to the association of women's poetry in the collective *imaginary*. In this important collection Boland negotiates her relationship to her own iconic status as a poet who, along with other so-called 'Irish Women Poets', is powerfully and problematically placed in the 'place of the mother'. Boland problematises her relation to her own iconic history of representativeness and negotiates her own self-embraced object use as a phallic poetic mother. Boland decaethects the phallic cultural 'mother' by assuming its voice and iterating a public, self-explicating woman persona who is ironically aware of the pre-phallic or pre-Oedipal presence of the mother before her 'ostensible' loss (into self-lessness) in the eyes of the culture. As such this volume explicitly undermines her own ambitions towards being a poet in the modernist sense of 'living the poet's life', which had become a poet's life predicated on tropes of absences. Thus the poetry of absence and the 'place of the mother' as predicated on lack, both of a woman's self

and the representational structural relation to daughter, is challenged in this collection. The poem "The Lost Land" enumerates "all of the names [she] knows for a lost land:/ Ireland. Absence. Daughter." (Boland, 1998: 38). Here she draws attention to the collapse of mother into Ireland, of mother into daughter so that mother-daughter symbolisation is lost. The collection attempts not only to recover the mother daughter intergenerational link, but also differentiates between the phallic mother body of 'lack' and the maternal body obscured by this insistence on lack.

Peter McDonald's review "Extreme Prejudice" (1999) of Eavan Boland's *The Lost Land* is a clear demonstration of the psychodynamics of a critical and artistic culture that defines itself as a child in relation to a muted form, constructed as 'mother', and which is uncomfortable with the mother leaving her definition as 'lack'. He writes that *The Lost Land*

is packed with moments of self-conscious meditation on history, on family and on nation; it is full of "themes", like "Irish language and culture", which can "open out" (good to hear this one is so tightly shut it needs to expand a bit) "from autobiography into a sense of larger belonging"; it sets out to explore (Boland's own words this time) "the ghostly territory where so much human experience comes to be stored". (McDonald, 1999: 85)

McDonald's criticism that "the English" in *The Lost Land* "is awkward to the point of near collapse" (McDonald, 1999: 85) unwittingly notes a very deliberate effect on Boland's part. *The Lost Land* is, after all, the volume where Boland 'opens' up a 'wound', that which she had scarified and closed in "Mise Èire"; a scar muted and accepted as a signifier of lack, a mimetic and palely imitative "passable imitation/ of what went before" (Boland, 1989: 72). The woman's voice that valorised the female self in "Mise Èire" was thus speaking from the site of castration; the scar left in the wake of the removal of the phallus; woman as a lacking phallus: the phallic mother and the Object. In *The Lost Land* the speaker in the poem "Mother Ireland" identifies herself not as "Mise Èire", but as the 'mise en scene' on which the projections of the phallic mother play: "Night and day/ words fell on me" (Boland, 1998: 39). In this poem Boland historicises her relation to her own poetic desires, reading her earlier desire to be a 'representative' poet within modernist terms of representativeness as partaking of the exchange of the maternal body for the phallic mother. She charts the effect of accepting the compensatory power of the 'exceptional woman' in the place of the mother who is a dis-member of the society and of the symbolic order, "From one of them/ I learned my name" (Boland, 1998: 39).

In "Mother Ireland" she reverses this exchange, bringing the maternal body into representation by naming the phallic mother. She erects a poem that takes this phallic construction of femininity to the point of near collapse: "I rose up. I remembered it" (Boland, 1998: 39), thus she appears to accept the symbolic order on its own terms. Only then she "could tell my story" (Boland, 1998: 39). Erection, not English, is stretched beyond endurance here, and erection is then collapsed into 'openness'. *Mise Èire* becomes "Mise en abyme" offering what M.H. Abrams described as a "glimpse of the abyss itself in a vertigo of the underlying nothingness" (Abrams, 1988: 272-273). This openness is the uncharted territory of the unsymbolised maternal body, of the pre-Oedipal relationship that is obscured by the fetishisation of the Oedipal crises as the origins of identity. Readings such as McDonald's understand stretching into this supposedly pre-symbolic stage as indeed beyond endurance and the exposure of such 'openness' as "underlying nothingness". However, when read outside the fantastical register of the phallic mother, then the underlying nothingness is 'exposed' as meaningful indeed.

For Boland's speaker by 're-membering' herself not only documents her own phallic

relation to the nation ("It was different/ from the story told about me" [Boland, 1998: 39]), but signals a difference outside of its problematic that can indeed be understood as story, as narrative, as meaningful. Instead of the 'nothingness' the "abyss", the 'chaos' that supposedly exists outside the symbolic order, what she finds there are other narrative possibilities. And in this story she 'leaves', echoing both the absence of the mother in the symbolic order, and the necessity of 'leaving' the reader to facilitate an inter-subjective relationship with the reader/child/nation who refuses to let 'Mother Ireland' go and who instead cleaves to her in the re-investing of a nostalgic and melancholic nationalism. For the nation and language are both identified with the "scar", with the phallic figuring of woman, of 'membered' Mother Ireland in "A Habitable Grief":

This is what language is:
 a habitable grief. A turn of speech
 for the everyday and ordinary abrasion
 of losses such as this:
 which hurts
 just enough to be a scar.
 And heals just enough to be a nation. (Boland, 1998: 29)

The 'absence' of the passable imitation, the lack of the phallic mother is replaced with the mother actually leaving and 'opening' the wound: "I could see the wound I had left/in the land by leaving it" (Boland, 1998: 39). Here the phallic mother leaves her own representational lack, her own absence, and the wound is left open. The loss of the mother's lack is resisted by the reader/nation/ in the frozen symbolic order:

come back to us
 they said.
Trust me I whispered (Boland, 1998: 39)

The poem resists closure by not finishing on a full stop, leaving the wound and the form open, iterating the very openness which McDonald's reading finds so disturbing. The centring of the ontological conjunction of the 'object subject' "*me* I" in the middle of the final line brings the mother as a double being (as both the object world of the child, and as her own individuated subject) into the forefront of visibility, a doubleness which the cultural frames that fetishise the child's perspective are unable to accommodate. The *me* is itally stressed signalling the way in which this object condition of woman is iterated by the common culture. "*Me* I" are in an 'open' relationship, joined by the space of ostensible lack, signalling the condition of their separation in an Oedipal economy. Equally, this "*me* I" is not joined by an em-dash, thus breaking the umbilical tie between mother and child that seemingly naturalises the binding of the mother in the object position to the child's subject. This invites the recognition of the (m)other and the possibility of meaningful inter-subjective dialogue. Benjamin points out that "the condition for the other being recognised is that the other also be a subject, an ego" (Benjamin, 1998: 100) and she goes on to quote Cornell who presciently writes:

the strangeness of the Other is that the Other is an I. But as an I, the Other is the same as me. Without this moment of universality, the otherness of the Other can only too easily be reduced to mythical projection. (Benjamin, 1998: 100)

The "strangeness" of the (m)other is that she is indeed an 'I', and this 'I'-ness is what interferes with her uninterrupted use as an object. But if the 'I'-ness of the mother is recognised then the 'I'-ness of the child can be too, and inter-subjective relating can take place. Without the recognition of the (m)other as the different 'same' then mother Ireland's difference is indeed mythologised as 'lost origins', as irretrievable 'pre-history' and (m)other's difference as threatening chaos, disorder and loss. With the centring of the "me I" in "Mother Ireland" the subject-object/child-mother symbiosis is here replaced by the mother-woman/object-subject conjunction that displaces the child/reader as the centre of the poem. This displacing of the reader corresponds to Sprengnether's observation that "when mothers write they unravel the fiction of mother-infant symbiosis" (Sprengnether, 1990: 233).

This unravelling is fiercely defended against by the critical economy represented by McDonald's reading of *The Lost Land* which is done in the manner of a child who objects to its mother's articulation of her own difference from her object use. The reading resists the poem's implications of the cultural displacement of the mother-object through which the formalist culture McDonald defends mediates itself. Twice he draws attention to her own self-situating. And tellingly it is on the point of her insisting on being recognised in the "conception" of an understanding of Ireland, that her self-insinuating seems most objectionable:

Certainly a conception of Ireland and its history as significantly mythic, and as things made good, as it were, in the present time, and in Boland's own moving hand (or moving words), runs through *The Lost Land*, so that the poet feels she must get in on everything: there is no kind of historical suffering to which Boland cannot return a triumphant "Me too!". (McDonald, 1999: 88)

Boland's assumption that she can get "in on everything" is read as an impertinence too far by McDonald, and that combined with the palpable presence of her moving hands and words (her unpredictable behaviour outside of the child's control which means she can leave or exist outside the register of the child's understanding), adds up to her greedy (insatiable) possession of "everything". The objection to her 'me, me, me-ness' seems a disproportionate response to a poem that does what poets do, that is, shape and make claims for the language they choose. A response such as this is more proportionately understood as the splitting off of the child's feelings about being 'left out' of the mother's world and the projection of the child's greed for the mother onto her as her 'greedy' me-too-ness.

McDonald writes that "for all her fascination with 'my words', Eavan Boland's *The Lost Land* shows almost no acuteness of attention to language, and this is a lack from which the book simply cannot recover; nothing will make up for this" (McDonald, 1999: 89). It is implied here that Boland by 'leaving' is not properly 'attentive', she is the 'bad mother' within the Oedipal complementarity, whose pursuit of her own womanhood takes her attention away from the child, as s/he becomes aware that she has objects of desire other than him/her. The loss of the mother as "everything" creates a sense of 'nothing' and lack in the child. The "lack from which the book simply cannot recover", that "nothing will make up for" this "lack of attention", corresponds to the heartbroken child whose grief at his mother's loss feels like too much to bear, before the feelings can be negotiated and managed in play. Rather than face and negotiate the loss, lack is thus here split off and projected onto the mother to prevent her loss, and Boland's attempt to vacate the representational category of lack, of the phallic mother, means that lack has to be re-projected onto her. The transition from seeing the mother as an object to recognising her as a subject is facilitated by play. Symbolic play replaces symbolic equation as the child's main means

of mediating the world. Instead of the mother *being* the object, she comes to 'symbolise' it, and in turn the child learns to symbolise her so that he/she can manage her moving away from him/her (as in the well known Freudian example of the *Fort-Da* game) and a gap between mother and object is created that allows her subjectivity to be recognised. The literalness of the well-behaved symbolic equation is replaced with the punning, playfulness and slippage of symbolic play.

This review resists allowing such play that allows the acceptance of this loss and the acceptance of the mother as a subject a legitimate part in the aesthetic of the collection. Instead it presents a set of prescriptions about what good poems and sentences should be about—prescriptions that protest too much independence facilitated only, as previously argued, by a disguised dependence on the object. Thus the poem is not expected to 'play' but to, in so many words, 'grow up and earn its keep'. It is, we are told, "an elementary principle of English that short sentences must earn their keep as elements in a larger pattern of variation and syntactic suppleness" (McDonald, 1999: 86). A poem, after all "must stand by its own integrity of expression, form and intelligence; it cannot lean on 'larger patterns' of pseudo-coherence as a way out of its own shoddiness of exertion, its weakness of form, or its apparent silliness" (McDonald, 1999: 87). No silly play, and no weakness allowed—speak up, make yourself heard, no fumbling for words, no babble, echolalia, no pleasure in sounds, no risk, no play, no separation. Boland's work is described as "stumbling and bathetic" and "non-sense". What McDonald describes as nonsense is indeed related to a non-sense: "talking nonsense slowly, deliberately, and with complete conviction doesn't stop it being nonsense" (McDonald, 1999: 87). The lack of 'sense' is the child's sensing that the mother's attention, her sense, is elsewhere, which is then split off and re-projected onto the mother. The absence instantiated by such poetry for such readers is part of protecting the child's fantasy sense that the mother belongs only to them.

This refusal to let the mother belong to herself is echoed in Carol Rumens review of *The Lost Land*, which compares the experience of being witness to Boland's self-ownership of her own historicisable trajectory as equivalent to being beset by a pedantic and overbearing "teacher". Carol Rumens compares Boland's tone in *The Lost Land* to the manner of a strict schoolmarm who 'over-teaches':

reading the poems in *The Lost Land*, I sometimes feel as if I'm sitting in a classroom.... [T]he teacher has a rhythmic, melodious, if slightly monochrome, voice. She has captured my imagination; Pictures are unravelling in my head. Then all of a sudden she slams her desk-lid down. "Are you paying attention girl, girls and boys", she booms. "I am talking to you. I am teaching you an important lesson. ARE YOU LISTENING?". (Rumens, 1999: 124)

Boland's self-contextualising thus meets with punitive criticism centred on outrage at her authorial presence. This outrage is disguised in critical language that reads such 'self-explication' or 'self-situating' as detracting from the 'integrity' of her work or its ability to 'speak for itself'. In reality such self-awareness of her work prevents its being self-made, self-birthing in the terms of a tradition of poetic authority which depends on the matter as silent, and thus her self-awareness, unlike that of her male counterparts, has not succeeded in making her an integral part of the 'powerful tradition' but locates her instead in the sub-section of women's writing. Rumens goes on to comment that "if the language here were more highly charged, less clichéd, this authorial self-consciousness would justify itself ... as it stands it intrudes". Interestingly it is only by conforming to the personal, interiorised and minimised hushed conventional femininity that Boland elicits Rumens's approval. Rumens writes that "paradoxically, the quieter the voice, the

more personal the psychological dynamic of the poem, the more authority it yields" (Rumens, 1999: 125). When a woman's quietness and her affirmation of personal, interior psychological dynamic that continues to affirm another's 'authority' meets with approval, then the underlying logic of an Oedipal model of thinking history, identity and community is **exposed**. When the fear of the unknown and of loss that informs Oedipal child's cultural defence can be confronted through critical and discursive play, then woman can be less an object, and more a subject in her own right. When the **myth** of lost origins represented by the phallic nationalist mother is replaced by the very material **self-presence** of the maternal body, then **some** hope for social justice will be possible. For as long as the perspective of the cultural child is authenticated as the singular and **primary** view, not just of society, but **also** of critical dialogue, then Irish women in the family of Irish studies will continue, representationally and constitutionally, in the castrated place of the phallic mother.

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